

Content but also unwell: Distributed Character and Language in *The Merchant of Venice*

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Character, so central to eighteenth and nineteenth-century appreciation of Shakespeare, fell out of favour in the mid-twentieth-century. This first occurred at the hands of the “New Criticism”. L.C. Knights, in “How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?”, was instrumental in the classic shift of critical focus from the life and humanity of the fictional people in Shakespeare’s plays (exemplified by A.C. Bradley)¹ to a view of the texts as elaborate poetic forms, to be read for their network of figurative structures and connections rather than for the psychology of their characters. The rise of structuralist, poststructuralist, new historicist, and materialist theory and criticism in the 1980s took the New Critical aversion to character still further: the New Criticism and its British counterparts in figures like F.R. Leavis, Cleanth Brooks, L.C. Knights, Wilson Knight and Derek Traversi, were considered too entrapped by a belief in a common humanity, even if these critics eschewed Bradley’s insistence that Shakespeare’s characters were somehow real people, amenable to the same moral and psychological judgement.

The problem with character criticism for the new theory and politics was that it was both anachronistic and politically regressive. Historicist critics maintained (wrongly) that the idea of a subjective interiority did not exist before Shakespeare, and Marxists and Poststructuralists held (also wrongly) that an interest in Shakespeare’s characters necessitated a lack of attention to the broader ideological, social and political aspects of the plays. Recently character is receiving renewed attention as a means to restore an ethical dimension to our interest in literature, and even a more nuanced concern with politics. Cognitive psychology has offered compelling reasons to revisit the question of a certain kind of constancy among all human beings, traditionally collected under the rubric of “human

¹A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear Macbeth*, 3rd Revised edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1992).

nature”, and disturbing political developments in the twenty-first century that seek to fracture any sense of human solidarity leads us to ask whether the idea of a common humanity might not be quite as regressive as critics and theorists have thought.

A recent anthology offers essays in what it terms “the new character criticism”, and its editors, Paul Yachnin and Jessica Slights, observe that “Shakespeare’s characters have continued to have a lively existence for theater practitioners, playgoers, students, and general readers” (3). Indeed, they make the more forceful claim that

character is the organizing principle of Shakespeare’s plays—it organizes both the formal and ideological dimensions of the drama and is not organized by them—... character is the principal bridge over which the emotional, cognitive, and political transactions of theater and literature pass between actors and playgoers or between written texts and readers.²

In the light of nearly a century of anti-character prejudice, this is a provocative claim. But it is liable to upset only a coterie of academics who have become ensconced in an academy that, in its focus on professionalism and historicism, has grown ever more alienated from a world beyond archival research and the scholarly press.

This essay, a collaboration between a theatre practitioner and academic, seeks to reinvigorate scholarly enquiry into the nature of Shakespearean character, not as abstraction from the text, but as experienced in performance. We steer a path between the denigration of character as a critical concept by almost a century of Shakespeare criticism and the elevation of character as a unitary, centripetal force of performance and appreciation by the non-academic world of audiences, directors and actors. For Yachnin and Slights, character as organizing principle of Shakespeare’s plays arises from a dialogical interaction through which ideological and ethical issues may be expressed and interchanged between figures whose psychological unity remains intact. Each character is a single and singular entity through which ideology is both expressed and contested. Talking about Shylock, they insist on the unity of his character, especially as expressed by the constant reference to him in the play as a dog or cur:

² Paul Yachnin and Jessica Slights, eds., *Shakespeare and Character: Theory, History, Performance and Theatrical Persons* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009). See also the special issue on character in Shakespeare of *Shakespeare Studies*, XL (2012), guest edited by Michael Bristol.

...there is no transcendence of ideology in the play. Even when he gets his day in court, just when he has the chance to make a public case for his injured fatherhood and manhood, Shylock is still a dog that lifts its leg, as it were, against the Venetian state. (Yachnin and Slights, 11-12)

Although we agree that character is inescapable for our critical appreciation of the poetry, the structure, the plot, the ideology and the humanity of Shakespeare's plays, we disagree with both Yachnin and Slights and the common, popular notion beyond the academy that there is an inherent unity in the concept of character in Shakespeare³ This runs the risk of fetishizing character. We mean this in the technical sense of an object invested with excessive emotion and fantasy, without recognizing that such an object is in fact a product of *relationships*. Such relationships are obscured or forgotten in the very perception of character as fetish. The signal case of such fetishization is *Hamlet*, which, as Margreta de Grazia reminds us, has been almost universally reduced to Hamlet the character, whose ineffable mystery we continue, tirelessly, to try to pluck out.⁴

There are many other examples of this tendency to fetishize single characters. The list is long: Othello, Cleopatra, Macbeth, Ophelia, Lear, Richard III, Rosalind... and of course Shylock. *The Merchant of Venice* has long been considered Shylock's play. Just as every actor would prefer to play Malvolio rather than Orsino in *Twelfth Night*, so Shylock has overwhelmed all the other characters, in the eyes of critics, actors and audiences. It used to be Portia. We could investigate this shift of sympathies, but the point remains that a single character has tended to dominate the play and its manifold relationships.

The key term here is relationships. For even the most character-driven readings and performances would not deny that a character is always established in relation to other characters. In responses, provocations, challenges, declarations, questions, denials, pleas. But the conception of character we are interrogating is assumed to accommodate such

³ For audiences, actors and directors Shakespeare is synonymous with character as it is encapsulated by Alexander Pope's famous statement that: "To this life and variety of Character we must add the wonderful Preservation of it; which is such throughout his plays that had all the Speeches been printed without the very names of the persons I believe one might have apply'd them with certainty to every speaker". Alexander Pope, <https://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Texts/pope-shakespeare.html>, accessed 28/08/2017

⁴ Margreta de Grazia, *Hamlet without Hamlet* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

relationships from a position of singular integrity or identity: a character like Shylock seems to be reactive and proactive in relation to others from a position of independent psychological repleteness; from this certain centre he engages in the bond with Antonio, pleads for a recognition of his own humanity, is torn by his loyalty as a father, insists on the letter of the bond, and finally declares that he is content but also unwell at the verdict of the court. But is there such a centre? If so, where does it lie? How does an actor find and express it? And is there an essence that exists no matter what we do with it or who plays the part?

Audiences, actors, directors and theatre critics are now committed to the belief that a character like Shylock can be represented only by a great actor—one who offers a single, commanding embodiment of the facets of the figure we call Shylock. Actors long to play Shylock; directors plot the play around such a major figure; audiences flock to *The Merchant of Venice* to see and hear celebrity actors: to Laurence Olivier at the Old Vic, Al Pacino on screen, F. Murray Abrahams on Broadway, Patrick Stewart at the RSC or Jonathan Pryce at Shakespeare's Globe. But what if Shylock's character were distributed among different actors?

Karin Coonrod's historic production of *The Merchant in Venice* in July 2016, staged for the first time in the Venetian ghetto,⁵ distributed the character in precisely this way by having five different actors play the part of Shylock—one in each scene in which he appears. Coonrod felt that five Shylocks would explore the representation and embodiment of the character in new ways: "I couldn't settle on a famous guy to play Shylock because in my head I could see what they would do ... what better way to truly investigate the *character* of Shylock, rather than a mere interpretation of Shylock, than by allowing all of us entrance into him ... This way the painful human nature of the character will be highlighted more than the individual performance of an actor." (themerchantinvenice.org)(moked.it)

The key provocation here is Coonrod's desire to allow all of us entrance to Shylock, Jew and non-Jew, man and woman, father and mother, outsider and insider alike. The casting of five Shylocks began as an exploratory tool in development. And it remained, gathering layers of poetic implication. Shylock as everyman. As the outsider. As the slivers of self that are self-

⁵ See Carol Rutter's review of the production, "*The Merchant of Venice* in and Beyond the Ghetto", *Shakespeare Survey* 70 (2017) and Shaul Bassi's account of the origins of the production, "The Merchant *in* Venice: Shakespeare in the Ghet in the same issue.

persecuting and incongruent. As all the nationalities, all the genders, all the humans, that have ever been displaced, considered “alien”, been betrayed, and of all the hurt and complex parts of our soul that seek belonging and integration. Of our fractured self that seeks healing. But also retribution and revenge. Of a splintered mirror that reveals more than the individual who gazes in.

Such distribution of character, especially in Coonrod’s hands, challenges a further commonplace of current criticism and theory: the rejection of the notion of a universal humanity that frequently manifests as a reflex revulsion. Thomas Newkirk, in “Selfhood and the Personal Essay: A Pragmatic Defence”, remarks on the rigid exclusion of categories at particular moments of academic consensus:

The capacity to self-monitor in matters of taste—to identify and resist the appeals of sentimentality—is part of the identity equipment of academics, particularly in the humanities (Newkirk, 2002). It is a form of cultural capital, an ingrained preference for the ironic, distanced, critical, and complex that, as Bourdieu demonstrated, serves to establish class distinctions.⁶

The notion of a universal humanity has for the past four decades been excoriated by the academics Newkirk mentions, as precisely part of the “identity equipment” of “taste”, although taste would itself be part of the category of concepts considered to be beyond the framework formed by the “ironic, distanced, critical and complex”. It is excluded on multiple grounds: by an entrenched historicism, a more attenuated sense of political mission which used to see the universal as the refuge of that arch-scoundrel, “liberal humanism”, and, ironically—for it borrows from the very Leavisian and Ricardian moral vocabulary that it attacks—its fellow traveler, “sentimentality”. To speak for a universal humanity is to wallow in something completely foreign to a properly critical intellect:

⁶ Thomas Newkirk, “Selfhood and the Personal Essay: A Pragmatic Defence”, in *what Makes Writing Good?: A Multiperspective*, ed. William Coles and James Vopat (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1985), 33-53 (39).

The author's rationality is in question, and so is the credibility of the argument. If you are the victim of a "sentimental" epithet, you have been excluded from the magic circle. It is as if your readers are too tough for you, and you are too much of a sissy for them.⁷

Newkirk quotes Richard Miller's argument that "these judgments and preferences are not purely intellectual; they are experienced bodily as forms of discomfort, even revulsion" (39). This is apposite for our argument. For the experience of the theatre as Coonrod presented it in the Venetian ghetto was also not *purely intellectual*. It was experienced *bodily* by members of the audience, certainly as discomfort and revulsion at some points, but also as identification, in ways that could not be dismissed as mere sentimentality.

By splitting the "character" of Shylock across five different actors in the Venetian Ghetto production, Coonrod thus evokes what Michael Bristol revives as Shylock's "human condition" by extending the character from a single figure to multiple embodiments of such humanity, restoring a long-derided sense of the "common humanity" of Shakespeare's characters and ourselves:

For Shakespeare the idea of human nature appears tragically in the image of unaccommodated man the "poor bare forked animal" (3.4.99–100). Human fragility, "the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to" ... is the common and natural condition of human personhood (Yachnin and Slights, 23).

A diversely refracted Shylock did not meet with universal approval. One prominent Shakespeare academic who saw the production observed that the experiment "seemed to sacrifice any possibility of development in the play's most compelling character in order to make a fairly obvious political point about the way race is perceived". To say this is to think of character in Shakespeare in a linear, teleological way—as something that "develops", achieving completion only at the end after passing through successively progressive stages of mental and emotional expression in a continuous embodiment of a single self.

The five Shylocks of this production were not merely a bold experiment or a distracting gimmick, but rather revealed something crucial and often unnoticed about Shakespeare's uses

⁷ Suzanne Clark, "Rhetoric, social construction, and gender: Is it bad to be sentimental?", J. Clifford & J. Schlib (Eds.), *Writing Theory and Critical Theory* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1994), 96-108, 101.

of language in the creation and conceptualization of character.⁸ That “splitting the part and making literal the multifaceted and somehow irreconcilable personality of the character” (Bassi, 75), emphasises that the conception of five Shylocks, or indeed multiple Shylocks, is contained within the text itself. The words through which character is constructed in Shakespeare (and it is always constructed, never given) suggest a character whose multiplicity resembles that of Montaigne’s celebrated descriptions of a fragmented, even contradictory, selfhood:

If I speak variously of myself, it is because I consider myself variously; all the contrarieties are there to be found in one corner or another; after one fashion or another: bashful, insolent; chaste, lustful; prating, silent; laborious, delicate; ingenious, heavy; melancholic, pleasant; lying, true; knowing, ignorant; liberal, covetous, and prodigal: I find all this in myself, more or less, according as I turn myself about; and whoever will sift himself to the bottom, will find in himself, and even in his own judgment, this volubility and discordance. I have nothing to say of myself entirely, simply, and solidly without mixture and confusion.⁹ (*Essays*, “Of the inconstancy of our actions”, II.1)

Montaigne likens the descriptions of the self to the adoption of different theatrical roles: “There is no description so hard, nor so profitable, as is the description of a man’s own life. Yet must a man handsomely trimme-up, yea and dispose and range himselfe, to appear on the Theatre of the World.”¹⁰

In Shakespeare’s theatrical construction of the self through what he would have known as “personation”, and we call character, the “contrarieties” of self are distributed across its staged and verbal manifestations, even though the names that act as speech prefixes are embodied by a single actor. Coonrod’s distribution of the role of Shylock across different actors in *The Merchant in Venice* made such distributed character much more apparent.

⁸ See Rutter, “*The Merchant of Venice* in and Beyond the Ghetto”, 85 fn. 10: “letting us see Shylock in pieces, Shylock as a series of parts, Coonrod was doing something ... ambiguous and radical. She was unsettling continuity, a fixed interpretation of the role, and ultimately the play.”

⁹ Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, “Of the inconstancy of our actions”, *Essays*, ed. J.I.M. Stewart, trans. John Florio (London: The Modern Library, 1931). II.1.

¹⁰ Montaigne, *Essays*, “Of exercise or practice”, III.1.

Moreover, that move involved a paradox: the distribution of Shylock's character across differentiated bodies, singular and particular in size, shape, accent, nationality, race and gender, invited the recognition of an utterly unsentimental *universal* humanity. The universal was embodied through multiplied singularity.

When five actors play a single character, what exactly is distributed in a play that consists of nothing but lines of prose and verse? Obviously, those lines, with their speech prefixes of "Shylock" or "Jew"; yet when those lines are distributed across different actors, this does not mean that each actor portrays an incomplete or fractured character: merely a *part* of a whole. The richness of the language with which Shakespeare draws his characters is akin to the range of different frequencies across the colour spectrum. But there is a danger that a single actor's interpretation and presentation of a character may obscure or obliterate some of the colours or combine them into the impression of white light.

Distributing the character across different actors means that each actor refracts what we might see as only white light in a *single* actor into the different hues and shades that are in fact the unrefracted components of that light. Each of these actors fills the lines with voice, expression, movement and the semiotics of the body in different ways, bringing out aspects of the text (and therefore of emotion, response, thought, provocation, reflection, rhythm) that are likely to have been attenuated or even negated in a totalizing performance by a single actor. In the distribution of Shylock across five actors, each prism renders apparent a particular coloured component of the white light, but is not reduced to that single component: it retains the full spectrum. Each actor embodies a full humanity; he or she is not a partial or truncated personation of such humanity.

The challenge to actively understand each embodiment as both a whole and as a part of a whole, invites the viewer to identify with such a distributed Shylock in a range of possible ways, not only to participate actively in the process of understanding the continuity of character across different forms of embodiment, but also to recognise themselves in the representation. And that was Coonrod's ambition: to distribute the character of the "Jew Shylock" in such a way that all of us might recognise ourselves in him and him in ourselves. This provocation, to consciously consider the construction of character, might seem similar to Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, by which the familiar emotional engagement with a character is disturbed and suspended to challenge the audience to think politically, but it passes through a very different route. Rather than alienating the audience emotionally, Coonrod sought to

forge a “community of strangers” by exciting them to recognise, through the differences between actors communally creating a single character, a universality in which all are complicit: “He is us” (Coonrod Arts Hour). The distribution of character thus travels beyond the actors, into the body of the audience. The audience becomes a sea of Shylocks.

In a BBC interview, Howard Jacobson discusses the challenge for an audience: “the idea put me off ... because I want to retain sympathy for one person ... for me retaining sympathy for Shylock is very important ...”. He praises Sorab Wadia, who played the first Shylock, as “saucy, quick, agile ... terrific”. But he and the interviewer refer to him, not by his name, but as “the young Shylock” and “the Indian actor”, - “I love the Indian actor...”¹¹ thereby obfuscating the person behind the epithets. And this is what we all do with character.

In Coonrod’s words, Shylock was distributed across “a young Zoroastrian man, an older Croatian man, an English woman, a middle-aged Venetian man and a middle-aged Jewish American man”, each of them presenting “the complexities of Shylock’s character: successful merchant, strict disciplinarian father, wronged man, killer, foreigner, misunderstood, marginalized”. Our default response tends to reduce an actor to a category and indeed a character to an archetype, but this multi-casting resists being captured by labels – older, younger, woman, man, ...Indian, Jew. When there are five different Shylocks, ages, races, acting styles, religious convictions, sexual preferences, accents, gender, height, weight, hair colour, ear shape ... we are propelled to see past all these “characteristics” and confront the tendency to make arbitrary categorical difference a thoughtless tool of alienation. Diana Henderson notes of this distribution:

By embodying Shylock diversely, the ways we do and don’t find differences ‘significant’ really came through ... we forget that four centuries mean that groups and religions and categories themselves don’t have stable meanings, yet people often talk about characters as if we understand them using our modern categories (of gender, age, etc.). So the production really brought out those complexities in intelligent, moving and often disturbing ways.

¹¹ “The Merchant in Venice, The Arts Hour—BBC World Service”. *BBC*.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p04331nk>

The Arts Hour, 00:05 09/08/2016, *BBC World Service Radio*, 55 mins.

<https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/0306B298> (Accessed 19 Oct 2017)

Distribution of character asks us to question whether differences are significant beyond our reflex responses.¹²

Leslie A. Fiedler claims that through bad conscience we persist in misremembering Shylock and all the stereotypes he embodies to expurgate Shakespeare “by cancelling out or amending the meanings of the strangers at the heart of his plays”.¹³ But Coonrod, challenging this tendency, reveals the complexity of the outsider as a fluid category: “I opened up the character of Shylock to be played by five very different actors ... So the character of Shylock became Jewish *and* universal, an expression of every outsider living in a dominant and often cruel culture.” We are invited to embrace the outsider at the heart of the play -- “to feel what burns, to open eyes to the light, to hear a cry and a call, to wonder at these stones and find a way of justice and mercy: a stand for Judgement” (Coonrod, *programme* 7). The outsider is focused on Shylock “the Jew”, whose cruel persecution was heightened in the historic place of the Venetian Ghetto’s imprisoning walls, with its memorial plaque commemorating those murdered in the shoah. And yet the outsider is simultaneously everyone. It is “the Indian actor”. It is Portia. It is the servant. It is the pregnant moor. It is the melancholic merchant. It is any one from whom we arbitrarily distance ourselves through categories of identity and exclusion that in our minds remain static, immutable and unfractured.

The distribution of character recognises that “the stranger” extends to all parts of our fragmented selves, and to all the characters’ yearning for connection in Shakespeare’s play. Characters obsess about far-away things, with nostalgia and melancholy: about riches, about ships, about Belmont, about the moon:

Tutto il tempo un po’ come una fisarmonica questo spettacolo ... it’s opened and it’s closed at the same time sui i sentimenti dei personaggi. Perché Antonio is sad, Bassanio è preoccupato per Portia, Shylock per la figlia, Jessica per Lorenzo, Lorenzo

¹² Sabine Schülting, discussing a dark and daring 1978 German production by George Tabori with multiple Shylocks, variously played by a cast of thirteen actors, notes that the effect was to blur binary oppositions, increase emotional impact, and show both the critical potential and disturbing effects of an adaptation - Sabine Schülting, “‘I am not bound to please thee with my answers’: *The Merchant of Venice* on the Post-War German Stage” in *World-Wide Shakespeares: Local Appropriations in Film and Performance* (London: Routledge, 2005), 65-71 (69-70).

¹³ Leslie A. Fiedler, *The Stranger in Shakespeare* (London: Croom Helm, 1973), 99.

per l'amore di Jessica, e Lancillotto fra due padroni ... tutti questi personaggi anche Salanio e Salarino sono sempre in preoccupazione per qualcosa.¹⁴

And this melancholy is never fully disclosed or satisfied. For ultimately, at the heart of the play, and perhaps at the heart of human experience, we are all outsiders searching for a love and mercy that integrates us, but forever finding it elusive.

The first Shylock, in the scene in which Antonio and Bassanio engage over the bond, is played by Sorab Wadia - "the Indian actor" - who is born in India to parents of Persian ethnicity/Zoroastrian religion, lives in New York, identifies as a Persian-Indian-American and is an "Actor & Singer. Also: pianist, photographer, traveller, polyglot, potter, hiker, knitter, cook, transcriptionist, animal lover, oenophile, secular humanist & wannabe farmer."¹⁵ His interpretation brought out the character's charisma and humour with wit and irony, rather than telegraphing the hatred and rancour signaled in Shylock's asides. His comic responsiveness was exemplified one night when he improvised playfully on the lines "does a dog have money? Can a cur lend 3000 pounds?" as an actual dog wandered onto the open-air stage in the middle of his monologue, to send the audience into gales of laughter. The proposed contract for a pound of flesh to be cut off "from whatever part pleases me" was expressed with infectious humour making it a "merry bond" indeed. His proffered hand seemed a genuine gesture of friendship - "I would have your love". A handshake would have been customary to complete business transactions in the Renaissance: "among Christians a contract was sealed with a kiss or with a handshake, contracts with Jews were sealed with a bow, so that the bodies of the parties need not touch".¹⁶ Antonio, from fear of touching a 'polluted' Jewish body, rejects Shylock's offer of his hand and his love, ensuring that the only intimacy possible between them will be at knife's point. In the trial scene, when the knife is finally released from his chest, both Shylock and Antonio begin to laugh. Although this moment is played by Ned Eisenberg - the fifth Shylock - it reprises the earlier moment of

¹⁴ "All the time the play is a bit like a piano-accordion...its opened and closed at the same time with the feelings of the characters. Because Antonio is sad, Bassanio is concerned about Portia, Shylock for his daughter, Jessica for Lorenzo, Lorenzo for the love of Jessica, and Lancelot between two masters...all these characters even Salanio and Salarino are always preoccupied with something." (Michele Guidi - Bassanio)

¹⁵ <http://www.artistrove.com/artist/340316836046495/Sorab%20Wadia>

¹⁶ Richard Sennett, "Fear of Touching: The Jewish Ghetto in Renaissance Venice," in *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), 215.

laughter when the first Shylock struck the bond. These echoes and iterations between the Shylocks seemed to occur organically. Wadia, reflecting on his performance, remarks: “Holy shit that’s Ned, it’s a gesture Ned does and I’m using it, so obviously we are informing each other whether we know it or not and I love that we are. Working as an organism taking from each other even when we don’t know we are taking from each other.”¹⁷

Although Wadia is a very different actor to the other Shylocks and offers his own nuanced interpretation as “the first scene” Shylock, we understand that this Shylock does not exist solely to repeat a first scene existence over and over. Nor is this Shylock capable of a different ending to Ned Eisenberg’s “trail scene” Shylock. The distribution of lines allows the interpretation of character to change in each scene, yet the narrative remains shared. This first-scene Shylock can only be the last-scene Shylock after he has lost his daughter as the middle-scene Shylock. The casting of a different Shylock in every scene thus allows the audience to be fully invested in that moment of his existence as complete and contained within that moment. A character fully realized in a moment, but also changed moment to moment.

The local Venetian actor, Adriano Iurissevich, expert in *Commedia dell’arte* actor with an accomplished career, played the second Shylock. Having to act in English, which demands particular verse and prose rhythms, was a challenge to him: “you get to the maximum only in your own language because when you have to think of the words there is a problem, the words have to come by themselves”.¹⁸ His Shylock did not have the sardonic wit of Wadia’s but was full of sensitivity. He used his *Commedia* training to give physicality to the character and a different rhythm to the scene. Instead of a tyrannical father, we see an older man concerned for his daughter, sympathetic to his servant, and weary of a world full of painful intrusions from outsiders who hate him. He infused his interactions with compassion. For him Shylock was “very human, somebody in conflict who is feeling something bad is going on and they don’t know what to do, hesitation, conflict between love and hate, somebody who would like to be loved I think”.¹⁹ The moment of farewell with Jessica became profoundly

¹⁷ Interview with Sorab Wadia, unpublished documentary footage, Ted Hardin and Elizabeth Coffman, 2016.

¹⁸ Interview with Adriano Iurissevich, unpublished documentary footage, Ted Hardin and Elizabeth Coffman, 2016.

¹⁹ Ibid.

moving. Working in the spaces between the lines, it was filled with uncertainty, anxiety and premonition. The role of father was embodied in all its strength of attachment as well as its overbearing protectiveness.

The third Shylock was played by Jenni Lea Jones – an actress with an extraordinary singing voice that she affirms is her Welsh birthright. In a play in which the absent mother is particularly remarkable, for Jones the casting of a female Shylock brought out the maternal aspects of the character: “A parent losing a child is a huge thing and coming from a maternal perspective.”²⁰ Jones was struck by Shylock’s humanity and complexity, feeling that his many aspects and facets rendered him Shakespeare’s most complicated character, even more than Hamlet: “A lot of people will say that this is an anti-semitic show, which I cannot believe in any way because Shakespeare has made this character so real and so complex; there is nothing to not like about him. Completely rounded character on the stage that you understand why he behaves the way he behaves.”²¹

Jones’ Shylock enters at the pivotal moment when the play becomes darker and unhinged, a moment seamlessly matched by Coonrod in the timing, when the natural light fades and the electric light kicks in. Peter Ksander, the lighting director, remarks: “When we lose the actual sun there is a point where there are no shadows. Not even attached shadows, not even the ones that fall on your faces. And that is the moment we click into artificial light, our own sun, our own way of revealing.”²² Jones gives two spine-chilling wails before she delivers the most famous monologue in the play, “Hath not a Jew eyes?” Kent Cartwright observes: “The most powerful moment in the play, for me, was when, after the daughter-ducats episode, the female Shylock let out a prolonged, gut-wrenching howl of almost inexpressible pain, frustration, and anguish. With that feral cry the play pivoted and deepened emotionally for me.”²³ Jones delivers the speech, full of grief and agony, underscored by cello music. It is the

²⁰ Interview with Jenni Lea Jones, unpublished documentary footage, Ted Hardin and Elizabeth Coffman, 2016.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Interview with Peter Ksander, unpublished audio, 2016.

²³ Personal email correspondence, 2016.

lament of a mother who has lost her child. It is Medea. It is Rachel. It is the absent Leah. And it is a primal cry against all injustice.²⁴

The fourth Shylock, Andrea Brugnera, takes up mid-scene from Jones, commencing the dialogue with Tubal who is played by Ned Eisenberg, the last Shylock. Brugnera, an Italian actor, has worked with and known Coonrod for 16 years from the birth of *Compagnia Colombari* in Orvieto, Umbria. Brugnera speaks little English, and embodies a range of physical *Commedia* expression. His Shylock was conveyed by strongly stylised gesture, which evoked a great deal of pathos. He was doubled with Lancillotto's blind father, Gobbo: he was thus both the father who thinks he has lost a son and the father who *has* lost a daughter.

Brugnera felt that performing Shylock was like entering into the secret language of Shakespeare. That the work was important because it was universal in time and space.

Quello che mi sorprende è la potenza di questo personaggio di Shylock...perché nello stereotipo, anche shakespeariano, è un personaggio chiuso in un ruolo ben definito – invece, moltiplicandolo o dividendolo frantumavo in cinque biologie diverse - in cinque bios diversi, degli attori diversi, di lingue diverse, di modi di vedere diversi - questo personaggio diventa tutti – non è soltanto Shylock - non è soltanto il popolo ebraico, non è soltanto l'ebreo errante - è l'umanità. E per me, credo che sia il personaggio più umano che incontrato - più umano con il pericolo di essere più inumano. Quindi è molto reale, è molto realistico.²⁵

²⁴ In his commanding account of the genesis of *The Merchant in Venice*, Shaul Bassi, who conceived of and drove the project, remarks that “no Jewish Shylock was allowed to usurp or supplant the suffering borne by the Jews who were deported from Venice. And yet the prolonged howl of anguish uttered by the woman Shylock allowed for both empathy with Jewish suffering and for a more generalized identification with persecuted minorities”, “The Merchant in Venice: Shakespeare in the Ghetto”, *Shakespeare Survey* 70 (2017), 75.

²⁵ “What surprises me is the power of this character Shylock ... because in the stereotype, even Shakespearean, he is a character closed in a well-defined role – instead, multiplying or splitting it into five different biologies - in five different bios, different actors, of different languages, of different ways of seeing - this character becomes all – it is not only Shylock - it's not only the Jewish people, it's not only the wandering Jew – it is humanity. And for me, I believe it is the most human character encountered – the most human with the danger of being the most inhuman. So it is very real, it is very realistic.” Interview with Andrea Brugnera, unpublished documentary footage, Ted Hardin and Elizabeth Coffman, 2016.

Ned Eisenberg, the final Shylock, brings us back to contemporary Stanislavsky-based acting. He speaks with a New York accent and is precise and clear in his delivery. Eisenberg is the only Jewish actor who plays Shylock. He performed Tubal to Brugnera's emotional widower in the previous scene, offsetting Brugnera's pain with his own calculated, clinical provocation. Turning from Tubal into the final Shylock, Eisenberg brings a sense of wit and irony back to the part, echoing Wadia's delivery as the first Shylock. The doubling here in effect splits Shylock between cool, calculated menace and passionate betrayal, whilst imbuing the character he is about to play with an interior state of resolve that has moved beyond emotional reaction and self-pity. Eisenberg internalises Tubal's role as provocateur, carrying it into the final scene. Brugnera plays Shylock along *Commedia* lines, in starker emotional colours, in contrast to Eisenberg's incredulous use of satirical humour combined with an intense demand for retribution. Eisenberg expresses his righteous anger with cool logic and a honed, single focus that is somewhat insane: "I don't see him as a typical villain, I think he is somewhat insane by the end of the play as a result of what he has lost."²⁶ As much as the sympathy of the play is with Shylock, the production still holds him accountable, simultaneously holding all of us accountable, for our daily use of words of persecution, for our fear of the other, our thoughtless perpetuation of injustice, and our easy use of a term "mercy" without ability to show it.

In discussing the experience of playing part of a distributed character, Eisenberg notes: "It's interesting to see how everyone plays it ... We have to coalesce with each other and create one character with five different interpretations..." Wadia, the first Shylock, commented that he would have performed Shylock's "Hath not a Jew eyes?" monologue differently to Jenni Lea Jone's interpretation. Here we see distribution of character is not a distribution of a specific interpretation, because in heightening a particular aspect of character, filtered through the response of an actor, the variations are innumerable. Such variability asks an audience to interrogate preconceptions of what character is: it exposes the erroneousness of the idea that something is "not in character", since the quality of being human is in fact often revealed in inconsistency: "whoever will look narrowly into his own bosom, will hardly find himself twice in the same condition. I give to my soul sometimes one face and sometimes another, according to the side I turn her to."²⁷ Shylock remains Shylock in the multifaceted

²⁶ Interview with Ned Eisenberg, unpublished audio, 2016.

²⁷ Montaigne, *Essays*, "Of exercise or practice", III.1.

interpretation. And so we are asked to consider what it is exactly that makes him Shylock? The distribution of character destabilizes the idea that something essential defines Shylock, that, as we ask earlier, there is an absolute centre to the character that can be expressed only by the centripetal interpretation of a single great actor. Simply, he is Shylock because he tells us he is - “Shylock is my name”—but also because we accept that he is. The audience is essential in the endowment of his character. It is a collaborative process between them, the actor and the playwright: “Wear his words and wear his characters and be them and then let the audience get what it will from your performance.”²⁸

The production was marked by a powerful sense of ensemble: just as character was not privileged as a centripetal idea, neither was performer. The actors came together at this moment in history to invite audience into the play as guests and make it a sacred space.²⁹

Coonrod told the cast:

You will be meeting people, it's not like they are excised from the play, some people live here, look at the windows, you can see people looking out the windows ... It's very beautiful. This kind of play outside is a high level of guerrilla theatre... This is what's exciting, is the extremity, ok? So it's like being in prison, but ... we are also involving the people, *tutti quelli che sono qui* ... it's up to you to be the angel, to say “welcome to our play”. You! It's our party. This is your space ... Consecrated for our work. Together.

All the performers were complicit in the all the components of storytelling; they were scattered around the ghetto always in sight of the audience, moving from watching to participating, a continuous mutability and movability of presence in space. They were dressed and undressed by “black angels” – visible stage hands. For example, Elena Pellone (one of the authors of this piece) was robed in this way, changing from ensemble member into Nerissa, while Portia is similarly dressed and Lancillotto is purposefully disguised. In

²⁸ Interview with Sorab Wadia, unpublished documentary footage, Ted Hardin and Elizabeth Coffman, 2016.

²⁹ See Bassi's account of the significance of staging the play in the Venetian Ghetto: “*The Merchant in Venice* was predicated from the outset on a creative collision between the play and the place, in an attempt to see how two (early) modern myths could resonate with each other ... both *The Merchant* and the Ghetto are fundamentally ambivalent documents of Western civilization in having been both instruments of intolerance and catalysts for cultural transformation”, “Shakespeare in the Ghetto”, 69-70.

this recurring stage convention actors moved fluidly into performance spaces – an indication of authentic representation as well as a signaling of the ways in which character must play a performance of self. Nerissa now must be servant to Portia, just as Portia must be dutiful daughter to her father's will.

This fluid tapestry movement in the ensemble and the veil between the world of actors and the actor's world, always transparent in the moonlight, allowed a further engagement with not only Shylock as everyman, but also as a cog in corrupted social conventions, every moveable part both a willing participant and a victim of the system. When playing the bragging jacks, Portia, Nerissa and the servant Balzarina (conceived as female) are de-robed – released from one social convention, a moment of neutral freedom and re-robed as the “Bragging Jacks” – liberated and incarcerated in another social convention. And this moment of de-robing, of painting the canvass white in order to re-colour it in front of the audience, was a rippling motif in the play. A neutral mask is created and recreated as the Shylocks are liturgically dressed and undressed.

Both the specificity of Shylock's Jewishness and his shared humanity are embodied in this repeated ritual of the dressing and undressing. Dressing Shylock identically, in stone-coloured robes and yellow sashes, confirms a shared identity; but the ceremonial donning and doffing of this costume by actors of different age, race, gender, and demeanour conveys both the distributed humanity and the multi-faceted nature of the character. It connects the character in a linear way to the Shylock embodied in the scenes before, yet also allows a cleansing of preconceived notions as the dressing simultaneously resets the character to a nascent state, or neutral form. It frees the audience from a tendency to allow powerful initial impressions to obliterate later nuances or the telos of Shylock's end to overwrite, say, the poignancy, concern and loneliness of Shylock as father.

Paul Edmondson observes,

Watching the five Shylocks put on their robes to take up the role in their respective scenes made the production feel liturgical to me ... invoking the memories of the Ghetto itself, and paying full tribute to all Jews who have been persecuted.

There are two moments in which the five Shylocks come together to form a chorus. This is distributed character as shared community. Moving slowly together, they begin a low

keening sound, as the company, Greek-chorus like, weave amongst them, mocking and abusing them in different languages - Italian, French, German, Spanish, English - shouting “My daughter, my ducats, fled with a Christian”, then gather together chanting - “Why all the boys in Venice follow him, crying his stones his daughter and his ducats”, alternating between Italian and English. This builds to a climax until Jones turns and lets out her terrible, spine-chilling wail, the others resembling Rodin’s *Les Bourgeois de Calais*.

This moment marks both the chronological centre of the play and the heart of the interpretation. The choric moment integrates the persecuted, the persecutors and the audience: “Wherever this play is done, though there will be no ghetto, this wail is at the center ... it is almost like the wail of GOD at what we have done to ourselves ... there is the mystery, the ineffable, the theatrical gesture...” (*Jenni’s Wail*)³⁰

The doubling by actors playing Shylock as non-Jewish figures who persecuted him gave the distribution of character a further poetic resonance. In the trial scene, Elena Pellone as Nerissa disguised as the silent clerk, watching and notating all, became aware that the figures of persecution on the stage, who were played by actors who had also doubled as Shylocks, meant that the idea of nemesis deepened as figures of self become the assailants. Graziano was played by Wadia, the Doge by Jones and the two imposing court officials by Brugnera and Iurissevich all of them once Shylock. Wadia remarked of his split position: “Throw insults at my alter ego standing there literally on 180 degrees between two characters: the ‘villainous’ Jew and the most raging anti-semitite”. This combination of “most raging anti-semitite and “villainous” Jew” enables us as audience to consider that we are our often own

³⁰ Marie Malherbe, a French artist working in the Ghetto, composed a poem - *A Midsummer Night’s Scream – Un Cridans le Ghetto* - that responded to Shylock’s wail as performing a healing ritual, which distributed that healing not only across all the absent people in the ghetto, but across the very stones of the Ghetto itself:

Mercy Merci
Colombari
par votre farce libératrice
le ghetto crie ses cicatrices
et marche vers sa guérison.

“Mercy Thanks/Colombari/ by your liberating farce/the ghetto laments its scars/and walks towards its healing.” Marie Malherbe, *Venise*, 30 juillet 2016

(<http://www.artmajeur.com/fr/artist/mariemalherbe/blog/249382/a-midsummer-night-s-scream-un-cri-dans-le-ghetto>)

worst enemy, as fragments of ourselves turn against us and persecute us. As Cartwright noted:

The logic, as far as I can see, was in the fact of the doubling, that major Venetian characters also doubled as Shylock. If the doubling here was meant to be thematic, then I walked away with the sense that we are perhaps all anti-semites and, simultaneously, all potential Shylocks. I'm not sure that I am quite comfortable with that formulation or even whether that is what the production meant to say, but that is one idea that lingers in my mind.

Distributed character is therefore not defined solely by speech prefixes but distributes like a drop of wine through water to permeate all the facets of the play. Distribution becomes sharing. As each part is whole and simultaneously makes the whole, each role of persecutor and persecuted become part of a singular identity.

We began by stating that the distribution of character is imbedded in Shakespeare's text, that the "contrarities" of self are distributed across the character's staged and verbal manifestations. But the distribution of character across the five Shylocks and their doubling as other, opposing characters are embodied in the way Shakespeare distributes language between characters in the play. Each character speaks a language peculiar to him or herself that bears their identity like a fingerprint. And this is true. But the relationships among characters—the way in which character is constituted out of relations, similarities and differences—is also informed by the way in which language is distributed across and through character, and is shared with the different members of the audience as words pass from one character to another, retaining their earlier sense but also resonating with a new sense and intonation.

This distribution is captured by Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of dialogism and heteroglossia—that all language in use is formulated as a response to someone else, and that even when we speak with our greatest individuality and distinctiveness our utterances are always filled with the voices, the intonations, and therefore the judgements and emotions of others. Our voices are never wholly individual, wholly our own. Key words pass from mouth to mouth in the play; they are masticated and transferred, lobbed like a ball in a tennis match. The new word, imbued with its overtones, transforms our original notions. The greater ideas of the play resonate with each word's new overtones in this intense word game. Distribution of character

by dividing in effect multiplies the possibilities and transforms into both an individual and a shared experience. Just as the character is distributed, the word signifying the whole in itself is, although individual, defined only by shared use, transformed through context and a new perception of meaning.

Let's look at two examples of Shakespeare's distribution of language. The first is the word "content", which is used only six times. Antonio is "content" to seal to the bond; Bassanio reads the injunction to "be content" when he achieves Portia; and Jessica wishes Portia "all heart's content". In the trial scene, the final three usages pass noticeably from Antonio to Portia to Shylock, linking the three of them in a painful triangle. Each use of the word means something different and yet contains within it all the meanings of its previous use, so that Shylock's final "I am content" is almost a vomiting of words violently force fed to him by the others. The second example is the word "mercy". Everyone knows this word in the voice of Portia, in the resonant, well-known tones of "The quality of mercy is not strained". We tend to think of "mercy" as *her* word. Or at least as the word of the Christians. In fact, the first time we hear the word is in the opening line of Act 3 Scene 3. Shylock enters mid argument – "speak to me not of mercy" – and the word born in his mouth in actuality has just been passed to him offstage by Antonio. As it is passed it changes its resonance through the negation: it signifies a lack of understanding, on the one hand, or a shared understanding too well that neither can offer the other mercy or be shown it. And the play has already shown us the meaning of Antonio's Mercy: it is to spit on Shylock's gabardine, to refuse the friendship offered in the lines, "I would have your love". So "Speak to me not of mercy" also contains "do not beguile me with a notion you know nothing of." From there the word is passed to his daughter Jessica, before it is reiterated by the Duke, and taken up by Portia in her famous speech. Mercy is moved cyclically until its last utterance, when Portia asks Antonio "What mercy can you show him?" The word that Antonio has initiated silently off stage returns to him. What has Antonio learnt of Mercy? Not enough.

The last scene of the play was rewritten in Coonrod's production as a second moment of chorus with the five Shylocks crashing through the fifth act to reiterate the courtroom monologue directly to the audience: "You'll ask me why I'd rather have the weight of carion flesh..." They have the final spoken words in the play, ending with the question "Are you answered?", spoken in repetition and directed at the audience. But this is not the last word of Coonrod's production of the *Merchant in Venice*. The word "Mercy" has one final journey.

It breaks the confines of the play. It transcends and surrounds the actors and the audience in projections of light upon the Ghetto walls, in Hebrew, Italian and English. The walls literally speak.

The ending – the collective “Are you answered?” – seemed powerful, although perhaps more for its confrontational quality than for any answer that we might make to the question. When Jessica throws up her arms and ‘Merci’, ‘Misericordia,’ and the Hebrew ‘Rakhamim’ are flashed on the wall, I felt that the intention was not so much to reinstate Portia’s position, as it were, as it was to say something like, mercy on all of us! (Cartwright)

In these projections, Coonrod is making explicit something inherent in Shakespeare’s distributed language. The quality of mercy is not strained. But neither is it restrained. It is shared. Mercy is not Portia’s word. Coonrod’s projections embody Shakespeare’s challenge to us to make mercy our word. By challenging the fetishization of character, a reductive categorization of “characteristics” and ownership over language as a divisive tool, we can experience a sense of character that is not held static in the idea of teleological repleteness. Through distributed character and language, Shakespeare and this production may just hold us all accountable individually, for what we are all in together.

To speak of “what we are all in together” is to return to the issue of a universal humanity, and the ways in which a distribution of character may contribute to the visceral, embodied sharing of that notion across multiple differences. Such universality is not a “core” essence that resides at the heart of every character, but rather a distribution of differences that, through their very multiplication, may strike each individual member of an audience as a point of human identification, and thereby attenuate received and habitual tendencies towards defining the self in terms of the exclusion of the other: “Every man beareth the whole stamp of human condition” (Montaigne, *Essays*, Bk. III, Ch.2). This happens in Shakespeare in the way he writes what we call character, especially in the ways in which words and speech acts pass between speakers to infect them, as it were, with the resonant intonations of other uses. But it is especially powerful when the singularity of character is distributed across actors whose very distinctions and dissimilarities invite an embodied empathy that opens a view to the universal without the taint of sentimentality.

